

University of the West of England, Bristol – HREiR 8 Year Report

Institutional Context

The University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) first achieved the European Commission HR Excellence in Research Award in January 2012. The Award was retained in January 2014 and again in January 2016 and September 2018. To support the development and monitoring process, a Concordat Implementation Working Group (aligned to the Researchers' Forum Planning Group, RFPG) was formed comprising the Researchers' Forum Convener (a Senior Research Professor), research staff representatives, Human Resources, the Graduate School and Research, Business & Innovation. The group reports to the University Research Strategy Implementation Group (chaired by the Pro Vice- Chancellor (Research) Professor Martin Boddy and comprising Associate Deans (Research) for each Faculty).

The input of research staff has been central to the development and evaluation of the University's HREiR action plans with representatives from each of our four faculties. There is research staff representation at all levels of the University including the Researchers' Forum that provides a platform and voice for all research-grade staff at UWE, as well as research staff representation on all relevant committees including the University Research & Knowledge Exchange Committee. Furthermore, the HREiR initiative is closely aligned with other quality assurance initiatives such as Athena Swan, eg through collaborative actions.

Key achievements and progress against 2018-20 action plan

Principle 1 - Recognition of the importance of recruiting, selecting and retaining researchers with the highest potential to achieve excellence in research

Problems in relation to data highlighted in the previous report have been addressed:

- a new HR System was implemented in 2018 and individuals can now use a self-service tool in order to update their data to ensure it is accurate.
- from this system, a research staff dashboard has been developed. The researcher dashboard is a visual representation of research staff data with a focus on equality measures, but also includes the monitoring of broad numbers in relation to turnover, progression and contract types (fixed term vs permanent). It is reviewed on a 6-monthly basis by the RFPG. It continues to be refined based on ongoing needs.

Increasing the number of staff on open-ended contracts has been challenging. Since 2016, the proportion of research staff on fixed term contracts has risen from 70% to 78%, largely reflecting the external economic conditions and an approach to engaging research staff associated with specified project funding. As an institution with 157 research grade staff spread across four faculties and thirteen departments, resources may not be sufficiently concentrated to support researchers outside project funding. However, there has been a concerted effort since 2016 to provide central funds to retain high potential researchers where possible, either as bridge funding between funded projects or to ensure researchers are fully funded if their current funding does not cover 100% of their time. According to CROS (2019), 28% of research staff have been at UWE 4 years or more and 44% at least 3 years. Around 1 in 4 are on institutional funding rather than external awards (sometimes in combination).

The processes for developing job descriptions is systematic, well documented and understood. All approved vacancies are reviewed within the HR resourcing team for consistency and challenged where appropriate. According to CROS (2019), 96% of research staff considered themselves to have an appropriate job description (up from 94% in 2017 and 74% 2015). Our target remains 100%.

During 2018-20, HR has been proactive in identifying and implementing options for widening advertising to attract a more diverse range of candidates. This includes a range of web, social media, and some specialist recruitment outlets that have a diverse customer base such as local BME networks and Voscur (development agency for Bristol's voluntary, community and social enterprise sector). All interview panel members undergo equality and diversity and unconscious bias training. There has been a steady increase in the number of female and BAME research staff (see below).

Principle 2 - Researchers are recognised and valued by their employing organisation as an essential part of their organisation's human resources and a key component of their overall strategy to develop and deliver world-class research

The Researchers' Forum continues to provide a platform and voice for all research-grade staff at UWE. A new chair, Professor John Hancock was appointed in August 2018. Through twice-yearly themed events, the Forum offers research staff a dedicated space to explore areas of interest. Each event theme is determined in consultation with Faculty ECR reps on RFIG. Two recent themes encompassed career development planning: 'Me, my career and the next REF' and 'Taking your career to the next stage - careers in research and beyond'. The Vice-Chancellor Professor Steve West gave the opening address followed by a Q&A at the last Researchers' Forum.

In the most recent staff survey (2019), research staff scored higher than the institutional average in the area of learning & development (+3%), and in particular in relation to taking opportunities to develop skills and expertise (+4%). Research staff also scored highly in feeling trusted, value and recognised (+4%), having the resources to carry out their work (+6%) and having opportunities to use their initiative (+3%).

Pay progression for researchers takes place in accordance with procedures agreed between the relevant trade unions at a national level with a bi-annual process for role progression. Between August 2017 and July 2020, there were 52 research staff progressions/promotions (33% of the population of research staff). Of these, about half remained in research-intensive roles while the other half progressed into other roles including lecturing and professional service posts at UWE.

For REF2021, in line with national guidance, research-grade staff are considered to have significant responsibility for research if they meet the criteria for being independent researchers. For those who do so, outputs are selected on the basis of quality as determined through a robust peer review process, irrespective of the role of researchers – there are no expectations about how many outputs are selected for any particular researcher. Provisional data indicates that 37 research-grade staff will have work submitted to REF2021

Principle 3 - Researchers are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in an increasingly diverse, mobile, global research environment

Through the Researchers Forum and the University's Researcher Skills Development Programme (RSDP) staff are provided with opportunities to broaden their understanding of the research environment and to consider future careers as well as to map themselves against the RDF.

To extend their personal research aspirations, and in particular to establish themselves as independent researchers, research staff are encouraged to apply for internal research schemes such as the Vice-Chancellor Early Career Researcher Awards (with grants up to £15,000). During the reporting period, ten research staff were successful receiving a VCECR award totalling £138,011.

Research staff are encouraged and supported to contribute to teaching and demonstration, and those who do now have access to elements of a new (2018) Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, aligned with the Higher Education Academy's professional accreditation framework.

Principle 4 - The importance of researchers' personal and career development, and lifelong learning, is clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career

In addition to access to the full range of staff career development opportunities available through HR, the University's long-established RSDP is available and actively promoted to research staff. The programme has over fifty training events a year which are refreshed and updated annually. All research staff are afforded the opportunity to attend sessions mapped to the Researcher Development Framework (RDF). Since 2018 new sessions have included 'Managing Your Career in or Outside Academia', 'Building Your Profile as an Early Career Researcher' and 'Exploring Social Entrepreneurship.'

Following a review, the University is poised to launch 'Invest in Yourself' in 2020/21, an integrated programme of support and career development for researchers at all career stages from PGR through to Professor. This will take the form of workshops, one-to-one instruction and other, asynchronous resources on core researcher development topics, differentiated to the appropriate RDF phase/s.

In addition, a pilot early career researcher mentoring scheme is shortly to be launched in the Faculty of Environment & Technology. The aim of this scheme is to assist ECRs in identifying and accessing the appropriate learning opportunities for their individual needs. If successful, we anticipate that this pilot will be rolled out across the University.

Principle 5 - Individual researchers share the responsibility for and need to pro-actively engage in their own personal and career development and lifelong learning

Through Researchers Forum events, staff are supported to develop career-building skills and confidence and to take responsibility for their own learning. Vitae career resources are promoted at these events and via regular skills development bulletins. Staff are actively encouraged to use the Vitae RDF planner (our subscription was renewed in 2018 and 2019).

Staff are reminded of the importance of the annual Performance and Development Review (PDR) process in developing their careers. CROS 2019 indicated that 70% of staff had undertaken PDR, but this translates into 88% if you exclude staff on probation and those who had recently started. Feedback in the 2019 Staff Survey showed 67% of research staff felt their PDR was useful in providing constructive feedback on performance (compared with 63% for all staff). Following feedback and review, a new PDR process and format to be introduced in 2020/21 places greater focus on the quality of the PDR conversation and on the regularity of meetings between annual appraisals.

Principle 6 - Diversity and equality must be promoted in all aspects of the recruitment and career management of researchers

Athena Swan - in addition to our institutional level bronze award, we have increased the number of departments who hold the Bronze award from three to five. All four departments within Health and Applied Science Faculty have achieved the award as well as the Architecture and the Built Environment department within the Faculty of Environment and Technology. A large proportion (55%) of our research staff sit within departments with Athena Swan awards.

The Women in Research Mentoring Scheme has been successfully running at UWE for the last seven years. The scheme matches female researchers to a mentor (male or female) in order to provide mentees with encouragement, support from experienced colleagues to fulfil their research aspirations. Since 2013, more than 300 members of staff have participated in the scheme. A review in 2019 showed that the scheme has a 94% satisfaction rate and 88% would recommend the scheme to others.

The UWE gender pay gap for research staff (5%) compares favourably to the overall UWE pay gap (12%) and also with that of other more research-intensive institutions. In addition, the RFPG requested a more detailed gender analysis of the pay differentials on appointment at each research grade. The findings showed there was no gender pay gap differentials at all levels within the grade structure.

Research staff data generated for the dashboard shows the percentage of female staff is steadily rising (from 54% in 2017 to 59% as at end 2019), as are BME staff numbers (rising from 17% in 2017 to 23% in 2019). Both of these metrics exceed current UWE targets set as part of our institutional Equality and Inclusivity agenda.

An equality analysis of our Mock REF (2019) showed that male BME staff were the most highly represented group among research-active staff (compared to all staff) whereas female BME staff had the lowest representation (a full analysis of the final submission will be carried out in 2021).

UWE Bristol is a certified Disability Confident Employer (successor to the Two Ticks Scheme) as part of our commitment to be an inclusive employer. Under this scheme we offer a guaranteed interview to disabled applicants who fully meet the essential criteria of a role (however, feedback shows that prospective candidates often chose not to take advantage of the guaranteed interview scheme, preferring to be assessed on a level playing field).

The numbers of staff self-declaring as disabled have increased through both recruitment and self-declaration whilst in employment from 4.5% in 2017 to 6% in 2019. This is also the level specifically for research staff.

A new UWE Mental Wealth strategy introduced in 2018 promotes the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students. This includes a mental wealth lab which focusses on the latest evidence-based research and has developed an award winning series of podcasts. We ensure that research staff are fully aware of these services via the Researchers' Forum.

In 2020, a new Critical Race and Culture Research Network was launched to bring together scholars, students, alumni and researchers who are engaged in exploring questions relation to race and culture within their discipline areas. The CRCRN operates across the four faculties of UWE to support research relating to race, ethnicity, culture and identity across the university. The network is a safe place to share ideas, opinions, research findings and emerging questions, and also a platform to disseminate research findings to a broader audience beyond the university.

Research Staff – Impact of Covid-19

During the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, key measures have been taken to support research staff at this difficult time, including:

- research staff have received regular and timely local, Faculty and institutional level communications during the lockdown period. These communications have included regular emails from the Chair of the Researchers' Planning Forum Group signposting University and other support services, and also encouraging self-organisation of peer support networks. Research staff also receive the general UWE staff newsletter.
- Covid-19 web pages specifically for researchers have been developed giving up-to-date information on a relevant topics including off-site research procedures; recruitment and contract information; finance; research funder guidance and 're-start' updates in relation to the re-opening of laboratories and other work spaces.
- HR has introduced social team chats for new starters so they can connect, share experiences and learn from each other.

UWE have been able to prioritise the re-opening of some research laboratories for the UWE research community – these laboratories were able to re-open in a Covid-19 secure manner in late June 2020 enabling research activity to continue after several months of disruption.